

**"Asian Theatre as Method: The Toki Experimental Project
and Sino-Japanese Transnationalism in Performance"**

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The Sino-Japanese collaboration "Zhuhuan shiyan jihua – yishu baocun he fazhan" (Toki Experimental Project: Preservation and Development of the Traditional Performing Arts),¹ is an intercultural and intergeneric performance network that brings together practitioners of *kunqu* – or *kunju* (Kun "Opera"), the oldest extant form of indigenous Chinese theatre (*xiqu*) – Japanese *noh*, and contemporary dance and theatre from Japan and the Sinophone region. Formally inaugurated in 2012, Toki is a joint initiative of Satō Makoto, a forerunner of Japanese underground (*angura*) theatre and artistic director of Tokyo's Za-Koenji Public Theatre, and Danny Yung Ning-tsun, an avant-garde theatre pioneer and co-artistic director of Hong Kong's leading transmedial arts

collective, Zuni Icosahedron, in partnership with the Jiangsu sheng yanyi jituan kunju yuan (Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Kun Opera Theatre), based in Nanjing, China.

Originating from a commissioned showpiece for the Japan Pavilion at World Expo 2010 Shanghai – *Zhuhuan de gushi* (The Tale of the Crested Ibis, 2010) – the tri-city collaboration between Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Nanjing subsequently evolved into a regular series of workshops, seminars, and performance co-productions devoted to the regeneration and transmission of kunqu and noh – both proclaimed in 2001 by UNESCO Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity – through the medium of contemporary performance. Since 2012, performing arts professionals, scholars, and critics from the three partner cities and various localities in Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and other regions have gathered in Nanjing for the yearly Zhuhuan guoji yishu jie (Toki International Arts Festival) – renamed as Zhuhuan yishu zhou (Toki Arts Week) in 2015 – to experiment with a distinctly deconstructed form of traditional hybrid performance which I designate as the Toki Theatre. In the Toki Theatre, kunqu interacts with a spectrum of genres – primarily noh and contemporary approaches – to generate a distinctive Asian brand of intercultural theatre.

The Festival's regular performance series "Zhuhuan jihua: yi zhuo er yi" (Toki Project: One Table, Two Chairs) – also known by its acronym, 1T2C – epitomizes the Toki Theatre's signature aesthetics. This transmedial collaborative format, which Zuni has championed since the 1990s, invites contributors to create 20-minute pieces for two or maximum three performers using a standard xiqu stage set of one table and two chairs. In the Toki 12TC programs – ranging between four in 2012 and seven in later editions – kunqu performers have worked together on the same stage with modern actors and choreographers, as well as practitioners of noh, *jingju* (Beijing Opera), Japanese string puppetry, and other indigenous Asian forms.

In general, one can describe the Toki Theatre as a transnational practice of deconstruction, hybridization, and cross-fertilization of national Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) traditions through the lens of contemporary performance. The result are intercultural productions that involve comparison as a cognitive device, a relational "mode of thinking" (Felski and Friedman 2013:1), and a conduit of "dialogical mediations" (Stam and Shohat 2013:120). Most significantly, Toki constitutes a paradigmatic, yet hitherto overlooked, enactment of Taiwanese scholar Chen

Kuan-hsing's conception of "Asia as method" in the field of the performing arts.

In *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010), Chen builds from the intuitions of Takeuchi Yoshimi's seminal lecture, "Asia as Method" ([1960] 2005), and Mizoguchi Yūzō's more recent inflection, *China as Method* ([1989] 1999), to call for a reassessment of the hegemonic patterns of knowledge production that, historically, have posited "'the West as method'" and privileged site of discourse in Asia (Chen 2010:216).² The reengagement of Asia as a key methodological hub and epistemic signifier – rather than as an endless repository of ethnographies and case studies – requires a deterritorialization of the prevailing "East-West binary structure," hence a deimperialization of theory (216).

Chen advocates Asia as method as an inter-Asian reference system, which enables a reorientation of our epistemological horizons toward alternate axes of connection within and across Asia. Asia as method envisages "Asia as a pervasive structure of sentiment" (214) and "mediating site" (x), to assist a tripartite discursive shift towards "decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war" [sic] (212). In other words, Asia as method harbors the potential to inhibit divisive nationalist ideologies, and to disperse the

residual colonial mentalities, imperialist assumptions, and cold war tensions that have hindered genuine integration among Asian societies since the latter half of the twentieth century.

In addition to a concrete geopolitical entity, Chen envisions "Asia as an imaginary anchoring point" (212), which can facilitate informal processes of renegotiation of deep-seated hostilities between nation-states – such as the lasting conflicts between China and Japan, or China and Taiwan – through cultural cross-referencing and cross-comparison of historical experience.

The significance of the Toki Project from the perspective of Asia as method is twofold. As a critical articulation, it captures a cohesive vision of East Asia as an integrated performative horizon or, to put it with Chen, "an open-ended imagination" (254). As a creative framework, it disengages obsolescent, yet persistent, notions of comparison as (East-West) binary opposition to reconceive comparison dialectically and dialogically, as inter-Asian relation.³ As such, it fulfils the purpose of Asia as method to override the Western-centric predispositions of dominant knowledge structures by "shifting [our] points of reference" (216) toward Asia, envisioning Asian theatre(s) as a dynamic epistemic producer and a-centred site of rhizomatic

interculturalism. As Chen maintains, "Asia as method ceases to consider Asia as the object of analysis and becomes a means of transforming knowledge production" (216).

In addition to offering a paradigm of Asia-focused "dialectic of comparison" (252), the Toki Project – with its base in Nanjing – presents a rare performative articulation of "*minjian* East Asia" in the still largely state-dominated mainland Chinese cultural landscape. The term *minjian* denotes "people-based" initiatives unfolding locally and transnationally in a sphere of societal interaction that is comparatively unfettered by institutional and corporate mechanisms (Chen, Hu, and Wang: 2013:329).⁴ *Minjian* social spaces have been crucial in assisting unofficial reconciliation gestures and transborder alliances in East Asia in the absence of genuine and open debate between oft-acrimonious nation-states. Likewise, as a non-governmental, artist-directed platform, the Toki Project has facilitated autonomous dialogue among performance practitioners which, as well as fostering creativity by inter-referencing the region's theatrical heritages, has supported micro-processes of informal diplomacy and transnational integration – particularly between China and Japan.

The 2010 collaboration between Zuni, Za-Koenji, and the Jiangsu Theatre in the context of Expo 2010 provides a meaningful case of minjian negotiation with the political and performative structures of the nation-state laying the ground for a longer-term non-institutionalized city-to-city exchange. As such, the Toki Festival – as the Toki Project’s core performance event – is a notable manifestation of “minor transnationalism” (Lionnet and Shih: 2005) in the Asian performing arts.

Expo Theatre: The Transnational in the National

The Japan Pavilion coordinators approached Satō about curating a centerpiece performance that would resonate with the overarching theme of eco-sustainability of Expo 2010, while endorsing a Sino-Japanese cooperation scheme to safeguard the Japanese crested ibis – or *toki*. Designated as a national treasure in Japan in 1952, the *toki* was declared extinct in the 1970s decimated by unregulated hunting and environmental degradation. Upon discovering a small population in China's Shaanxi Province in the 1980s, the Chinese government gifted Japan a pair in 1999. Japanese scientists successfully reintroduced the species to the wild in 2008, after a period of captive breeding. At the Japan Pavilion, the *toki* was paraded as an icon of Sino-Japanese friendship

(*Zhongri youyi*) and positive cultural exchange, with hostesses donning toki-themed headgear, and a logo design whose colours evoked the bird's rose-edged white plumage.

Satō agreed to the commission on the condition that he would collaborate with Yung, and that the resulting performance would build upon the latter's established practice of experimental xiqu (*shiyān xiqu*) with added Japanese elements.⁵ The outcome was the 20-minute kun-noh multimedia crossover *The Tale of the Crested Ibis*, which Satō and Yung co-directed with a cast of emergent kunqu performers from the Jiangsu Theatre and child actors from Nanjing xiao honghua yishutuan (Nanjing Little Red Flower Art Troupe). *Ibis* was performed 35 times per day in a 500-seat purpose-built wooden theatre for the entire duration of the Expo (1 May–31 October). The 6,619 shows were seen by four million people, the production setting a double record for the highest number of performances and number of spectators in Expo history (Ke 2016:31).⁶

As dwindling traditions which have grappled with transformations in the modern cultural ecology, kunqu and noh suited the tropes of loss and extinction of the toki rescue narrative, while reverberating with concomitant Expo 2010 concerns such as managing an ageing population and building a sustainable planet for the future.

Parallels were thus instituted between tangible and intangible heritage, endangered earth and threatened theatre, underscoring China and Japan's responsibility in preserving their indigenous performance environments alongside their biological ecosystems. The prominence given to young performers and young spectators – children were the primary audiences – further highlighted a joint preoccupation with the future of the theatre, the globe, and the human species.

The exhibition area inside the Japan Pavilion was divided into "past," "present," and "future" zones. As the culmination of its 60-minute tour, *Ibis's* retrofuturistic style of techno-traditional theatre synthesized all three temporalities by blending classic performance systems and pictorial aesthetics with digitally animated sceneries and state-of-the art stage properties. According to its creators, the kun-noh hybridization experiment would not only enhance Sino-Japanese cultural integration, but also foster a "new creative consciousness" (*xin de chuangzuo yishi*) (Zuni Icosahedron 2009) – or, put differently, an Asia-focused method.

Ibis tells a story of ecological protection and spiritual connection. A child seeks for a bird that has shed a white feather by a riverbank. A boatman helps the

child ride across the river and rescue a wounded female toki. The toki regains strength thanks to the child's discovery of the fountain of life, which only an eye as pure as a child's can see. Eventually, the boatman turns into a male toki and flies to the sky with the healed female, suggesting positive prospects for the rare avian species, and for humankind.

In the production, a male and a female kunqu actor (the boatman and the toki) enter the stage riding Toyota i-REAL personal mobility devices amidst an electronic soundscape with hints of traditional instrumentation. The woman dons a noh mask, and both wear modern costumes featuring simple embroidery and a minimalistic version of the traditional xiqu water sleeves (*shuixiu*), made of rose pink silky material suggestive of toki feathers. As the actors get on and off their futuristic vehicles to execute stylized movement routines, noh percussions and kunqu cymbals play to projected images of Chinese and Japanese traditional theatre architectures. A digital text runs in the background, detailing milestones in the Sino-Japanese toki preservation scheme, followed by color photographs of assorted natural and urban landscapes. A graphic animation of a child in Chinese traditional clothing superimposes with the real-life child actor on the stage. The performers' live interactions are reprised

by animated backdrops depicting the child and the boatman's journey through idyllic Chinese ink painting-style sceneries and – further beyond in time and space – along a polluted industrial waterside drawn in a manner that blends elements of Japanese *anime* illustration with accents of *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print). The kunqu performers intone a melancholic elegy to their ruined surroundings, whereas the child's closing tune, "Shengming zhi quan" (The Fountain of Life), imparts a message of global harmony, togetherness, and hope, which resonates "from past to future, from place to place" – as the song's lyrics express. The female actor performs a formalized dance with a noh fan and mask against a multimedia background of clear dripping water, projections of toki flocks flying across the auditorium, and pictures of children of all races frolicking contentedly on an unpolluted planet.⁷

Notwithstanding the positive negotiation of the unusual trilateral arrangement – with Hong Kong and Nanjing partners alongside the Japanese team – and the equally uncharacteristic selection of a Chinese form as the primary aesthetic vehicle for a Japanese national showpiece, *Ibis* still seems to reveal a measure of compromise. Yet, as the outcome of a complex mediation of governmental agendas, diplomatic sensitivities, corporate

interests, and artistic vision, it also effectively elucidates the generative frictions of the transnational and/in the national in intercultural collaboration.

In this context, I define the transnational as horizontal interactions that, at once, contain and transcend the national. As with the trans-Asian alliances forged by the Toki Project, such transversal movements occur below and beyond the scope of the nation-state, through cross-border exchange between non-institutional actors, minjian circuits, and civil society initiatives. As is widely noted, the transnational differs from both the multinational and the international, in that it circumvents government dealings and corporate transactions to privilege informal connections on a micro- or "minor" scale.⁸

Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih maintain that minor transnationalism is non-hierarchical, non-homogenizing, and non-normative. It mobilizes participative hybrid spaces "where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center" (2005:5). Nonetheless, far from removing all pressures by the center and all traces of the nation-state, the transnational stands in dialectical tension to the national – as the Expo commission elucidates. The transnational disputes, and is

concurrently premised upon, the persistence of the national, entertaining a dialogic relationship of resistance to and reliance on nation-state institutions (Hannerz 1996:6; Willis, Yeoh, and Khader Fakhri 2004:1).

Moreover, as Lionnet and Shih further remark, transactions in the minor mode are not solely and invariably motivated by a vertical confrontation with the major, the center, and the mainstream. They rather hinge on relational dialectics, for "in reality the minor and the major participate in one shared transnational moment and space structured by uneven power relations" (2005:7). Accordingly, if one takes the Toki network as a fully fledged articulation of minor transnationalism, its genesis in the Expo – an exhibition of nations orchestrated by nations – typifies a transitional site of mediation of major and minor, institutional and informal, creativity and corporatism, state interests, and intellectual solidarities.

World expositions have been understood performatively as stages for carefully choreographed displays of national cultures and nationalistic magnificence, where diplomatic and economic interests entwine. Expos are "theatre[s] of nations," in which competing imperialistic ideologies and colonial legacies interlock with shows of communitarianism and collective identity (Winter 2012:

78).⁹ However, the truth behind the Japan Pavilion's public assertion of shared history and harmonious "co-viviality" (*kyosei*) – "living together" in difference (Hanasaki 2007:186) – with China is that the two nations have consistently failed to bolster a sense of identification and cohesiveness since the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).¹⁰

In keeping with Astrid Nordin (2012)'s appraisal of the Shanghai Expo as a Baudrillardian simulacrum of global ordering, one might construe the exhibit of bilateral friendship at the Japan Pavilion as a likewise simulated mitigation of conflicted power relations through the concerted enactment of a trans-Asian "'family of nations'" (Winter 2012:88). Additionally, Tim Winter notes the widespread enlistment of the rhetoric of heritage by several Asian nations at Expo 2010 alongside the glorification of technological advancement (83). Japan's strategic mobilization of high-tech design, intangible cultural forms (*kunqu* and *noh*), and tokens of tangible natural heritage (the *toki*) as agents of public diplomacy is therefore hardly surprising. At the same time, a "minor" transnational approach also allows us to read Satō and Yung's equally strategic embrace of the language of heritage preservation as an application of Asia as method to the ICH discourse in the performing

arts. Put differently, one may contend that closely guarded national signifiers such as kunqu and noh were purposely mobilized to unravel tensions and taboos between Japan and China; they were used as conduits of decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war.

On close scrutiny, two possible areas of institutional intervention emerge from the *Ibis* concept, which resonate with the Japan Pavilion's dual narrative of international diplomatic appeasement and national industrial achievement: first, a corporate deployment of the theatre stage to showcase Japan's state-of-the-art technology and, supposedly, satisfy the Pavilion's prime sponsors; second, a message of peace oblivious to conflict.

Upon entering the performance area, visitors strolling past an imposing Panasonic Life Wall screen showing images of Japan's hi-tech wonders enjoyed a violin concert impeccably executed by a Toyota humanoid Partner Robot. As mentioned above, the kunqu actors travelled on Toyota mobility vehicles, and the video-montage running in the background at the start of the performance displayed scenes of people taking pictures with a Canon Wonder Camera Concept. Additionally, both the digital animation and the lyrics of the child's song

referenced the Japan Pavilion's main slogan of "interconnectedness" (*lianjie*).

More significantly, albeit not surprisingly, past grudges and present disputes went unmentioned in official press releases and Chinese media reports – swept under the carpet of diplomatic efficiency and political correctness. Environmental issues and a feel-good story about a rare case of positive cooperation obscured the actual state of Sino-Japanese relations.

It is no secret that the two nations have most often been associated for their passionate animosity over the unresolved legacy of Japan's war crimes in China – chiefly the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 (aka the Rape of Nanking) – but also more recent matters of historical revisionism and territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.¹¹ Incidentally, the offshore islands contention reached a crisis point precisely during the Expo, in consequence of a boat collision in September 2010. To this day, the failure to properly address the question of historical memory has prevented bilateral interactions at both state and societal levels from healing the unsettled strife between the two opponents (He 2013).

Analysts have nonetheless observed a relative easing of tension with the end of former Japanese Prime Minister

Junichirō Koizumi's term of office in 2006, while China's "ibis diplomacy" (McCarthy 2012) has been compared to normalization gestures such as the Sino-US ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, and China's "panda diplomacy" with Japan and other nations since the 1950s. The Hong Kong press picked up on this latest political turn, noting how Japan had "deftly" selected an episode of friendly scientific cooperation to dispel resilient Japanophobia from the war era, and mitigate the numerous controversies spurred by the Koizumi administration. A further deference to Chinese sensitivities was Japan's decision not to fly the national flag over the Expo, in an attempt to dispel the ghost of wartime militarism (Yan 2010).

While the above analysis suggests that the production concept and aesthetics may have been conditioned – at least partly – by institutional dynamics, it also hints at a more composite subtext that resists the official blueprint. As mentioned, except for a few added Japanese signifiers in the costume and media design (i.e., noh masks, fans, music, and movement details, ukiyo-e and anime inspired graphics, images of modern and traditional Japan), *Ibis* was, essentially, a Hong Kong director's reworking of China's oldest theatrical genre with a cast of actors from Nanjing. The intercultural format and the

display of Chinese artistry and aesthetics seemed unusual for an Expo supposed to exhibit Japan's national culture and talent. In fact, *Ibis* was the sole collaborative performance at Expo 2010 (Zou 2013).

The embodied evocation of the disputed legacy of Nanjing – silently yet suggestively channelled by the indicative casting of performers from the former Chinese capital – struck a further jarring note in the appeasing harmonics of bilateral friendship orchestrated by the Japanese conductors. Nanjing, as an erstwhile theatre of Japanese brutality, and kunqu, as its attendant theatrical expression,¹² were “intuitively” favored over other potential partner cities and performance genres such as jingju – China's national operatic form par excellence. As Yung explained, this was to tackle the affective barriers that still divide the two societies, and “help establish a meaningful and strategic communication platform to face the scars left behind by history” (Zuni Icosahedron 2011:24).¹³ To this end, the Expo lent an empowering platform for making strategic use of institutional settings and resources to forge bridge-building linkages between two “major” Asian nations via the “minor,” infranational mediation of Hong Kong.

Yung regards Hong Kong artists as optimally placed to serve as intermediaries in the region, because of the

former British colony's unique geopolitical position and interstitial status under the "One Country, Two Systems" governance agreement with Beijing: "Because Hong Kong's cultural role is marginal, it can avoid the pressures that come with being at the centre" (2013:237). It is indeed revealing that it was Zuni, a non-profit arts organization from Hong Kong, rather than a mainland Chinese cultural institution, that took the lead. Interestingly, however, some Chinese provincial pavilions decided to schedule xiqu performances upon hearing of Yung and Satō's plans (Zuni Icosahedron 2011:23-4). Government-run companies subsequently capitalized on the two directors' Expo success to create new versions of the toki story.¹⁴ Equally significant is that the Jiangsu Theatre – Yung and Satō's Nanjing partner – was no longer a state-owned troupe.¹⁵ Such factors helped liberate the Toki Project from "the compulsory mediation by the mainstream" (Lionnet and Shih 2005:2) while setting the foundation for an independent creative agenda in the longer period.

Japan's uncharacteristic homage to China's decisive role in rescuing its treasured bird, and unofficial national symbol, struck another discordant note in the *Ibis* concept. By placing China in a position of supremacy over her former colonizer, the toki salvation narrative

clashes with Japan's deep-seated sense of superiority over its Asian neighbors. Incidentally, the spatial arrangement of the Expo pavilions as planned by the Chinese hosts – with China standing at the center and Japan at the margins – also reflected this role reversal, as it “symbolically captured the uneasy bilateral relations of the time and how China ‘placed’ its primary economic rivals” (Winter 2015:45).

The sensitive issue of historical accountability and Japan's well-documented reluctance to atone for its past wrongdoings were also touched on. Yung publicly stated his ambition to establish an anti-war cultural center in Nanjing to enable artists to exercise their creativity while concurrently questioning their social milieu: “When no one is doing this, I think it's the artists' responsibility to take it over” (Liu 2010). Additionally, a line in the kunqu aria sung by the boatman and the toki points to the importance of being accountable for one's actions: “If the water of the Canglang river is murky, what does it have to do with me?”¹⁶ A critical undercurrent comes to the surface when one shifts the environmental theme onto the taboo subject of Japan's responsibility for its war crimes, and the endangered bird is taken as a cypher for the violent annihilation facing humankind. *Ibis* seems to indicate that social and

political relations -- both between China and Japan, and more globally -- can be rescued through joint effort, but this requires a sincere admission of one's (wrong)doings.

Despite these undertones, overall the modern elements in the production, such as the child's song and the digital montages, exude optimism about the future.

Conversely, the traditional components, such as the kunqu lyrics, hint nostalgically at the loss of nature, the

loss of theatre (kunqu and noh are perceived as endangered genres) and, possibly, the loss of humanity in China and Japan's polluted politics. Put differently,

while its retrofuturistic aesthetics appears utterly celebratory on the surface, *Ibis* does impart a tinge of melancholic scepticism. As Lionnet and Shih contend, in

the same manner as the sombre and reflective mood of the minor key in music counters the celebratory mode of the major chords, minor transnationalism provides an

instrument by which to play out the traumatic notes of the colonial past, and arrange new accords (2005:21).

Similarly, the *Ibis* collaboration did somewhat equalize the triumphalist rhetoric of the Expo harmonious

discourse by carving out an interstitial space of

"transgressive imagiNation" [*sic*] – namely, the manner in which transnational cultural production tests,

transcends, and retraces the constituents of the national
(Hitchcock 2003:9).

The Toki International Arts Festival: From Nations to Networks

In 2011, to mark the shared tenth anniversary of kunqu and noh's inscription in the UNESCO ICH register, Zuni and Za-Koenji co-organized a touring program of research forums, workshops, master classes, and kun-noh experimental performances in Hong Kong, Nanjing, and Tokyo with performers from the Jiangsu Theatre and Tokyo's Tessenkai nōgaku kenshūjō (Tessenkai Noh Theatre Laboratory). This led to the formalization of the Toki Project and the inauguration of the Toki Festival in 2012, with Yung serving as chief curator and co-artistic director, along with Satō and Jiangsu Theatre lead performers-cum-managers Ke Jun and Li Hongliang.

As a self-proclaimed intercultural (*kuawenhua*) and transnational (*kuaguojie*) network, Toki hinges on multiple conjugations of the notion of border-crossing (*kuajie*), as reflected in its core objectives: to assess the obstacles and opportunities inherent to the ICH preservation discourse through inter-Asian comparison; to institute a dialectical laboratory between Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Nanjing; to encourage cross-genre interaction

through the creation of an innovative repertoire that integrates kunqu and noh with modern theatre methods and technologies; to initiate cross-generational conversations between emergent kunqu performers and established Asian masters in a context of collective creativity, thereby challenging the hierarchical ordering of the traditional master-to-disciple transmission system; to provide a non-institutional and non-commercial setting where young artists can undertake innovative work, free from the constraints of their received training and from the pressures of a consumer-driven cultural industry.

Noh "living national treasures" Shimizu Kanji and Nishimura Takao, string puppeteer Yūki Magosaburō XII (Tokyo), and classical dancers I Wayan Dibia (Denpasar), Didik Nini Thowok (Yogyakarta), and Kala Krishna (Hyderabad) are among the ICH masters who have contributed to the Festival's research forums, training sessions, educational workshops, and performance programs. In addition, some of them have co-devised 1T2C pieces alongside veteran contemporary performers – including dancers Manop Meejamrat (Bangkok) and Matsushima Makoto (Tokyo) – and a regular team from the Jiangsu Theatre's 1980s-born fifth generation of actors.

Subsequent to taking shifts in performing in *Ibis* at Expo 2010, these emerging kunqu artists from the Jiangsu Theatre were cast alongside Shimizu, Nishimura, Matsushima, and modern theatre actors in two versions of *Lingxi* (The Spirits Play, 2011 and 2012). This kun-noh diptych – half directed by Satō, and half by Yung – is based on the eponymous 1998 play by Singaporean dramatist Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002), which dramatizes Japan's ambivalent role in the Pacific War as both victim and victimizer.

The young kunqu actors from Nanjing have since become a vital force in the Toki network, as co-creators and performers in several of Yung's experimental works – including *Zhuhuan xinjian #1* (Toki Letter #1, 2012), and *Zhuhuan xinjian #2* (Toki Letter #2, 2013) – and in the regular 12TC productions variously directed by Yung, Satō, and others. In 2015, as the Festival's cross-generational emphasis was enriched by the investigation of cross-gender performance in Asian ICH traditions, young noh actor Uzawa Hikaru (daughter of Uzawa Hisa, one of the first women in noh to perform in a principal *shite* role) joined her senior Tessenkai associates in the Toki alliance.¹⁷

The Toki Project represents both a continuation and an antithesis to the *Ibis* collaboration, in that it

substitutes the verticality of the Expo's "hierarchy of nations" (Winter 2012:78) with horizontal "transversalities", that is, the comparisons and dialogisms taking place across fluid transnational spaces – not between nation-states but rather between 'nation-relations'" (Stam and Shohat 2013:144). This observation echoes Lionnet and Shih's understanding of minor transnationalism as a relational space that subsists in the tensional interstices between national and transnational, major and minor, center and periphery. But it is also a force that produces and performs alternative hybrid formations through minor-to-minor interactions which are neither necessarily antagonizing nor inescapably governed by the major and/or the center (2005:5-7).

In this instance, the center/major does not only reside in the national, the institutional, and the intracultural mainstream (e.g., mainland Chinese organizations), as noted with regard to Expo 2010. Consistent with the discourse of Asia as method, the center/major is also embedded in the hegemonic type of interculturalism (Lei 2011a) that perpetrates imperialistic, colonial, and cold war inequalities by positing the West as the primal source of knowledge and

implied epistemic norm. The task of Asia as method is, precisely, to destabilize this approach.

The hegemonic model postulates difference as tiered, tree-shaped, and juxtapositional. Often, it engages tradition and indigeneity as tokenized markers of otherness or (self-)exoticism. Often, it deploys them cosmetically, that is, purely for their ornamental potential. Conversely, the Toki Theatre embraces a transversal view of hybridity which explores, yet does not essentialize, difference, thus serving “the unique function of being a cognitive tool” – as Jessica Yeung (2010:126) has characterized Zuni’s hybrid xiqu experiments.

Unlike the Expo production, which posited Nanjing as a silent signifier, the inauguration of the Toki Festival shifted the status of the Chinese city to that of a significant “contact zone” (Pratt 1992) for the articulation of Asia as method in performance. This choice of a permanent location was all the more sensitive considering the large-scale anti-Japanese protests about the escalating offshore islands dispute that erupted across China just months before the Festival’s launch in December 2012. Albeit insisting on the symbolic potency of Nanjing as a permanent home for the Project and Festival, Japanese participants expressed discomfort

about the war legacy and its possible repercussions on the Toki partnership, while also enacting it in performance (Pin Tu Miao Miao 2013).

A case in point is *Jishiben* (Notebook, 2013), Matsushima's collaboration with kunqu *wudan* (female martial role) Zhu Hong, from Nanjing, which was purposely selected as the opening performance of the 2013 1T2C program. Consistent with the xiqu convention, the actors' interactions with the traditional stage set maximized the performative capacity of the table and chairs to signify multiple character and power relations depending on their arrangement and orientation, hence imparting a potent visual index to the performers' affective articulations. Zhu's movement routines crystallized the agony and resentment of those killed in the Nanjing Massacre, whereas Matsushima's painful kinesis conveyed uneasiness and remorse toward Japan's history of violence.

The Japanese choreographer chose to turn his performance into a tribute to the war martyrs in consequence of a poignant visit to the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall. Both actors expressed their intention to make a symbolic contribution to Sino-Japanese reconciliation through their collaboration. At the start of the performance, Matsushima pointed a flashlight against a dark background, producing a circle of light

that some audiences perceived as an allusion to Japan as the land of the rising sun (Xu 2014). As he dropped it on the floor, the rolling flashlight generated eerie shadows, so that the scene took on the appearance of a ruined battlefield. Critics found the imagery intensely evocative of war-ravaged Nanjing, but also of post-atom bomb Hiroshima, and reminiscent of the distorted silhouettes of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. Zhu's corporeality conveyed fear and a struggle to escape from her aggressor, but also hatred and fury; Matsushima played the victimizer but also gestured regretful apologies toward the audience, and eventually stretched his arm out to sustain his battered companion. The performers' ambivalent standing as perpetrator and victim but, possibly, also as a couple of lovers or spouses mirrored the entangled fates of the two Asian nations (Wang 2014). Satō, too, voiced the responsibility he felt as a Japanese to uphold the memory of this unfinished historical chapter and metaphorically "compensate for the psychological wounds of Nanjing" through his artistic practice (Zhou 2014).

Nanjing again became an object of controversy some weeks ahead of the Festival's fourth edition in October 2015, when Tokyo protested against UNESCO's inscription of a set of documents on the Nanjing Massacre supplied by

Beijing in its Memory of the World Register. And again Sino-Japanese historical interactions were mobilized in the Toki 1T2C performances. *Fight Me Now?* (2015) re-enacted historical dynamics in China-Japan-US relations, in which the latter has frequently mediated between the two Asian contenders. Jingju actor Gao Yun, trained in the *hualian* (painted face) role, played arbiter in a choreographed combat between Matsushima and kunqu actor Sun Jing, also a *hualian*. Neither wore any of the elaborate makeup and costumes that are standard to their roles – just plain tracksuit bottoms and shirts.

Electronic music and a Madonna pop song provided an unconventional soundtrack to the fast-paced interweaving of three contrasting kinetic idioms. The choreography featured various chair-moving actions signifying the shifting positions in the diplomatic negotiations. The trio eventually carried the two chairs along with them downstage, using the stage as a large table for a conciliatory beer-drinking session -- a gesture of an apparent ceasefire.

Yung's metaphorical association of the Expo's environmental protection theme with the endangered status of traditional artists in contemporary society constitutes yet another connection to the *Ibis* production. The Project's chosen name, Toki, explicitly

compares scientific efforts to breed the rare bird with the challenges of rearing new generations of classically trained performers in today's cultural ecology, while also inducing a reflection on the significance of the ICH discourse as both a blessing and a curse for the traditional arts. As is surely the case for kunqu, the UNESCO recognition has, on the one hand, boosted government subsidies and global visibility. On the other hand, the rhetoric of heritage preservation has also been perceived as a death sentence. Does the ICH proclamation imply that the traditional arts "should be cultivated in protection, merely for ornamental purposes" (Douban 2013), as static relics and antiquarian curiosities that belong in the archive? Or should they rather be viewed as a pulsating repertoire – organic transmuting species that are capable of self-empowerment through adaptation?

As custodians and embodied carriers of a "living fossil" (*huo huashi*) within the xiqu tradition, kunqu professionals are often reluctant to alter its conventions. Comparable considerations apply to noh. Both systems rely on codification (*chengshihua*) and standardization (*guigehua*), and both value memorization, repetition, and acceptance of tradition (*jieshou*) over experiment and innovation (*chuangxin*) (Xu 2013: 117). Both have grappled with the trials of modernization and

commodification and, to varying degrees, both have modernized and commodified in an attempt to keep up with the times and attract new audiences.¹⁸

Satō's 1T2C contribution, *Zhan* (Station), which the Japanese director has developed over a number of years and through several variations, foregrounds the allegorical connection between the toki and the theatre, kunqu and noh, China and Japan. Noh master Shimizu Kanji and kunqu dan performer Xu Sijia appeared in both the 2013 and 2014 versions as themselves, as representatives of their theatrical traditions and, respectively, as the spirit of noh founding figure Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), and a toki. In the production, each layer of the performers' tripartite persona is announced by a sequence of textual projections concomitant to successive stage actions, as they transition from their real-life selves ("I am Shimizu Kanji"; "I am Xu Sijia") to a pre-expressive status of neutrality ("I am not Shimizu Kanji"; "I am not Xu Sijia"), to their professional identities ("I am a noh actor"; "I am a kunqu actor") and, finally, to their roles. Zeami and the toki meet as two homesick strangers on a timeless Sado Island – Japan's main toki conservation area. Significantly, Zeami was exiled to Sado in 1434, and the pair of toki China gifted Japan in 1999 were rehomed and bred there. The

actors communicate through chanting a set of lyrics adapted from "Chang xiang si" (To the Tune of 'Endless Longing') by Qing dynasty poet Nalan Xingde (1655-1685) – each in their own language and style of performance. The poem echoes the characters' loneliness and nostalgia for their homelands. As with *noh* and *kunqu*, Zeami and the *toki* are unfamiliar to one another, but there is empathy between them, and both are confronted with the challenge of survival in a new and potentially hostile environment. While Shimizu's deep chant and measured movement impart a sense of stillness (*jing*), Xu's falsetto vocalizations and fast-paced action are rich in pathos and dynamism (*dong*) (Dai 2014). The contrast of *jing* and *dong* enhances the relational potency of the aesthetic collision, suggesting that the reconstitution of tradition by hybridization does not inevitably amount to its collapse.

Yung invokes the trope of the (bird)cage (*longzi*) to denote the constraints forced upon traditional artists by cultural consumption, as well as their social (self-)perception as unassailable – but also increasingly irrelevant – national treasures. The cage can be both external and self-imposed; yet it is Yung's belief that traditions should be neither reified nor ritualized, but rather revitalized and reinvented. Aspiring to play a (re-)generative role in the transmission of tradition

requires Darwinian adaptability -- those who are flexible, unbiased, and dare to weave the threads of tradition into the flowing social fabric are the ones who survive in the same manner as the toki were released from captivity and returned to its natural environment (Douban 2013). Accordingly, the Toki Theatre's underlying logic might be described as an evolutionary practice of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of traditional genres by intergeneric collision and recoding of their essential components into modern theatrical aesthetics.

Toki Theatre: One Table, Two Chairs, Multiple Relations

As mentioned previously, the 1T2C series represents the Toki Festival's flagship performance program and distinctive "genre" (*juzhong*) (Xu 2013:117). Zuni first experimented with this format in the 1997 edition of their signature series *Zhongguo lücheng* (Journey to the East), which I have surveyed elsewhere as a model for transnational Chinese theatre(s), and a manifestation of rhizomatic interculturalism (Ferrari 2010). These short segments have been likened to contemporary variations on the classic xiqu extracts (*zhezixi*).¹⁹ As in xiqu, the standard stage set of one table and two chairs takes on a vital signifying role. On the one hand, its minimalist

conformation conjures a variety of hypothetical scenarios by virtue of its neutrality: the table and chairs can be used to evoke banquet halls, tribunals, bedchambers, thrones, mountains, boats, and so forth – as the storyline requires. On the other hand, its deceptive simplicity serves to enhance a multitude of power positions and relational configurations, so that an expert xiqu spectator can infer plot elements and character relationships from the manner in which the table and chairs are arranged and deployed. In the specific case of Toki 1T2C, communication via movement – and movement of objects – is all the more essential because the members of each creative team (usually comprising two to four individuals) may not share the same language and theatrical style.

One example is *Qiaoliang* (Bridge, 2013), in which Manop Meejamrat and Sun Jing connected Thai classical dance and kunqu not only through shifting corporeal dispositions, but also by interactions with the stage décor. The pair barely made any contact at first, as each executed his individual routine, over and over, ritualistically.

They subsequently took turns at replicating each other's postures, thus signalling the forging of a relationship, while also providing an implied commentary

on the conventions of transmission in traditional performance systems, by which a novice observes, imitates, and thereby receives the technique from a veteran. The chairs were turned toward the table that stood between them to face one another – figuratively producing the conditions for an exchange. Meejamarat and Sun eventually erected a symbolic bridge between the two indigenous traditions by holding each end of a scarf, which the former inherited from his teacher, so that it unfolded and united the two performers across the table.

Shiwu (Fifteen, 2013), directed by the Singaporean Liu Xiaoyi with three kunqu actors from the Jiangsu Theatre, also featured a long red scarf and various table-and-chairs configurations to denote different spatiotemporal junctures and subsequent stages in the actors' life over a period of fifteen years since their formal initiation into kunqu training. In Liu's *Zheng He houdai – guoqushi* (Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral: Was, 2015) – half of a diptych on the legendary explorer Zheng He (1371–1433), also comprising *Zheng He houdai – jinxingshi* (Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral: Is, 2015) – a partly suspended table imparted a poignant visual index to Zheng He's complex identity as a Chinese Muslim, a wanderer, and a eunuch. Similarly, the shuffling of chairs captured the feeling of rootlessness and the

pursuit of a stable sense of selfhood of multicultural Singapore, as articulated in Kuo Pao Kun's original play, *Zheng He houdai* (Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral, 1995) which Liu adapted for this 1T2C project.

In Satō's *Station*, the sequential rearrangements of the chairs mirrored the evolution of the relationship between Zeami and the toki. On their initial encounter, one chair was turned toward the table and the other outward, in the direction of the auditorium, hence implying absence of dialogue between the characters. In the final scene, the actors repositioned the chairs on opposite sides of the stage to face and imperceptibly connect to one another, while Zeami and the toki gazed at each other from a distance – in a sign of empathy and “silent communication between two cultures” (Dai 2014).

In kunqu (and xiqu more generally), the plainness of the stage design magnifies the signifying potency of the performer's body through singing (*chang*), recitation (*nian*), movement/action (*zuo*), and combat (*da*). Costume and make-up symbolism is also paramount. Noh is, likewise, a deceptively minimalist holistic system in that it amplifies the communicative qualities of the bare stage, the costumes, and the spare stage properties to achieve “mise-en-scène maximalism” (Salz 2016:56). The Toki Theatre, however, purposely divests these traditional

forms of their sophisticated elegance and evocative beauty. Elaborate ornaments are omitted: actors are outfitted in plain and often monochrome garments, sometimes removing or switching costumes and makeup – hence roles and identities – during the performance. Their inventory of props is restricted to the occasional fan, mask, or scarf. Vocal parts are sparse, and dialogue is almost, if not entirely, absent. In some instances, projected texts, digital sceneries, and electronic soundscapes complement the basic traditional components. The withdrawal of key external markers of difference returns each performance system to a state of semi-neutrality, and each performer to a state of corporeal pre-expressivity that is no longer entirely culture-, genre-, or gender-specific.²⁰

Such magnification of effect by subtraction of elements induces a sense of incommensurability and estrangement, as time-honoured conventions and hermeneutical coordinates become displaced. Traditional actors venture into alien surroundings, while modern performers acquaint themselves with the classical codes. Expectations of traditional audiences are equally defied, for they can no longer recognize the well-known stories, characters, and arias, while modern theatre spectators are unaccustomed to the formulas of the traditional

stage. Besides, the latter are deconstructed and themselves defamiliarized – or “made strange.” Hence distinctions between what is purportedly “authentic” and what is altered become fairly insignificant, and so does the oft-debated question of whether experimental kunqu should still be considered kunqu, or whether the Toki Theatre should be categorized as experimental kunqu, experimental noh or – simply – experimental theatre.²¹

As Jessica Yeung remarks, Yung’s method differs from prevalent approaches to contemporary xiqu – for instance, xiqu adaptations of modern or foreign narratives, or the application of modern technologies in otherwise canonical xiqu performances. Rather, Yung disrupts the traditional form and structure altogether: “Instead of adding new elements into otherwise conventional *xiqu*, he puts elements of *xiqu* such as individual episodes, sequences of movement or singing voices of performers in an essentially postmodernist theatrical framework” (2010:127).²² In this perspective, Yung’s *shiyán xiqu* (experimental xiqu) might as well be classified as *xiqu shiyán* (xiqu experiment, or experiment with xiqu).

Satō, on the other hand, pursues an aesthetic of monochrome minimalism on a visual level, with essential *mise-en-scène* and clean set and costume designs. In terms of performance, however, he tends not to interfere with

the chanting and movement patterns, keeping the traditional components relatively intact within the modern directorial structure, thereby highlighting the contrapuntal dynamics between kunqu and noh, and between the noh/kunqu and non-noh/non-kunqu segments. In brief, the Toki Theatre neither is “reformed” (*gailiang*), “newly written” (*xinbian*), or “alternative” *xiqu* (Lei 2011b), nor is it “new noh” (*shinsaku nō*). Paraphrasing Yeung, it is work that begins with *xiqu* (or noh), but often “finishes as a piece of performance art” (2010:136).

Meng duan meng chang (Making Dreams), one of Yung’s two contributions to the 2015 1T2C programme, aptly illustrates such a procedure. Starring Zhang Jun, a Shanghai-based *xiaosheng* performer known as the “prince of kunqu,” the piece derives its Chinese title from a line of Tang Xianzu (1550–1616)’s *Mudan ting* (Peony Pavilion, 1598).²³ Zhang has stated that the performance resulted from his reflections on the *xiaosheng* roles in Tang’s classic masterpieces, collectively known as *Linchuan simeng* (The Four Dreams of Linchuan), in which the male leads are confronted with questions to answer, and problems to solve.²⁴ His intention was to use Tang’s texts to investigate personal dilemmas about whether the traditional arts are “a source of nourishment or a constraint” for the actor, and whether or not the actor

is merely “a puppet” (Wang X. 2015) on the traditional stage and – possibly – in shiyan kunqu, given that Yung has, at times, faced accusations of oversimplifying complex theatrical conventions and exploiting traditional actors as “tool[s]” for his experiments (Ke 2016:27). To all appearances, however, *Making Dreams* barely has anything to do with Tang’s tetralogy, except for echoing its central tropes of dreaming, transcendence, illusion versus reality, and substance versus appearance.²⁵

At the beginning of the performance, Zhang is reclining on a red armchair, seemingly asleep. He wears plain white garments (jeans, shirt, and trainers), his head and face enveloped in a long white sheet, which also covers a large section of the stage floor. The space is stark, empty, brightly lit. A digital text runs on the back screen, relaying characteristic Zuni-style chains of affirmations, negations, and parallel statements – succinct, probing, and somewhat mystifying: “I sit here” / “I sit there;” “Things happening above me” / “Things happening out there;” “You are entering into your roles” / “He is entering into his role,” and so forth. Zhang neither moves nor sings. Essentially, he does not “act.” Only toward the end, a phantasmal voice – actually, an assemblage of electronically distorted samples of Zhang’s voice – resonates from off stage, reiterating the word

“dream” (*meng*) over and over, with varying intonations – shrill and deep, distant and near, clear and muffled. Zhang’s static performance is juxtaposed to the vibrant interpretation of his female partner, kunqu dan Xu Sijia, who appears as an oneiric vision. Presumably, Xu embodies the spirit of *Peony Pavilion* heroine Du Liniang, as she enthrals scholar Liu Mengmei in his dream. In contrast with Zhang’s modern appearance, Xu wears a traditional white gown with delicate embroidery and silky water sleeves. Her head is also shrouded in a white veil, and she performs part of her routine with her eyes covered.

The absence of obvious theatricality in Zhang’s stage work entirely defies conventional expectations for, traditionally, kunqu audiences go “listening to theatre” (*tingxi*) (Wichmann 1991), and appreciating the manner in which an actor executes a specific aria or interprets a familiar scene from the classic repertoire. Zhang’s performance thus consists of a radical reversal of the abovementioned four skills of singing, speaking, acting, and combating. Zhang has categorized this practice as “acting without acting” (*meiyou biao yan de biao yan*), which stems from a process of extreme reduction and simplification of the complex aesthetics of kunqu. Performance still takes place, yet not externally,

through the body, but inside the body, in the “inner theatre” (*neixin xi*) of the mind (Wang X. 2015).

In keeping with the principle of classification *ex negativo* that Zhang applies in his turn of phrase, acting without acting, I propose that, in this instance, *shiyankunqu* is (de-)constructed upon an antithesis of the four conventional skills. The actor is silent, and his voice disembodied (*meiyou chang*); he has no lines (*meiyou nian*), and there is neither outward movement (*meiyou zuo*), nor martial action (*meiyou da*). As such, the actor becomes pure presence – an embodied stage installation, as it were. Performance occurs via a sculptural display of dynamic stillness, as cognition and “concept” (*gainian*) (Wang X. 2015), rather than kinesis. The removal of one’s traditional costume, too, is itself a potent signifier of adaptation and (self-)deconstruction, which brings about a state of self-reflection and self-challenge.

As with Yung, Zhang is not new to experiments and crossovers – he has worked with *kabuki* actors, pop vocalists, jazz musicians, ballet dancers, and classical composers – and has likewise been blamed for desecrating a revered tradition. Nonetheless, Toki members agree that the real question is not one of corruption, damage (*pohuai*), or exploitation of tradition. As Ke Jun once

put it to a foreign observer: "You are British and you are learning Chinese. Will this harm your mother tongue?" – implying that the same applies to a kunqu or noh actor who acquires a new expressive idiom. For Yung, this is probably a false question, for he does not differentiate between the traditional and the modern stage: the stage is one and dialectics is essential to creativity.

Modernization and reform are, moreover, intrinsic to the historical development of xiqu (Wang X. 2012). The real questions hinge rather on the system of inheritance, and on the challenges inherent to the process of transmission (Xu 2013:118).

Process (*guocheng*) is key in the Toki Theatre, along with the space for searching (*zhaoxun*), questioning (*tiwen*), rethinking (*fansi*), and reflection (*sikao*) that Toki affords.²⁶ Especially the younger performers concur that, after an initial disorientation, Toki has empowered them to exercise their creativity beyond the orthodoxy of their received form, and to feed their lived experience into their stage practice. One kunqu actor has suggested that this kind of performance against the grain, achieved by undoing and – to some degree – unlearning the convention, has emancipated him from his overly "closed" (*fengbi*) mental frame (*kuang*) of the past (Wu 2015).

Interestingly, in 1T2C, this expansive perceptual shift occurs within a likewise seemingly closed pattern, that is, the fixed format. Put differently, it may seem paradoxical that the traditional actors attempt to overcome the constraints of their received conventions by means of another convention. Yet, on the contrary, far from being restrictive, the 1T2C structure enhances the “conversational” potential of the performances – as Liu Xiaoyi wrote in the program notes of the 2015 edition. Because all contributors create and “communicate under the same rules,” conceptual comparisons of “how” one responds to the framework (*kuang*) take precedence over a purely qualitative assessment of “what” one does. As with tradition, form can be a restraining (closed) cage, but also a liberating organism “to be proved or disproved” (Liu 2015).

Over the years, there have been more actors in each segment than the prescribed two; tables have been removed or swapped for the entire stage, as in *Fight Me Now?*, and the austere wooden chairs have been exchanged for velvety armchairs, as in *Making Dreams*, in which a long drape also stood for the absent table (tellingly, Yung is often the first to break the rules he sets). No matter whether one is compliant or transgressive, the stipulation of a shared set of parameters is essential to comprehend Toki

1T2C as a sign of Asia as method in performance. The table-and-chairs format constitutes, precisely, a tangible externalization of Chen's aforementioned "imaginary anchoring point" (2010:212), which enables disparate performing bodies to come together and connect as an integrated trans-Asian community.

Toki as Method for Asian Theatre?

The Toki Project participates in Asia as method's threefold thrust toward decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war of theatre theory and praxis in (and about) Asia by deconstructing aesthetic and epistemological conventions. Hence the emphasis is on "de-" – reversing, dismantling, undoing.

Within this Asia-focused framework, Toki can be seen as a case of minor transnational practice in performance because of its non-governmental, artist-driven, and city-based minjian approach. Yet, its genesis in the institutional context of the Shanghai Expo concurrently underscores the endurance of national discourses within transnational dynamics. While elucidating the manner in which national structures may condition the unfolding of transnational agendas, the Expo collaboration also indicates that the transnational can purposefully infiltrate and inspire national initiatives to promote

alternate narratives of minor discourse. If, on the one hand, transnationalism tends to uncover the persistent forces of the national, on the other hand, it unearths its interstitial and transgressive facets.

Writing of Lusophone theatre festivals, Christina McMahon argues that under certain conditions performers can take advantage of such interactive contexts to “recast” themselves and their nations within a transnational or, even, “‘post- national imaginary’ [...] that transcend[s] the boundaries of the state” (2014:9). Comparable observations apply to world expositions, as festivals of nations committed to narratives of constructed collectivity. Without excessively idealizing such minor interventions, the 2010 Expo collaboration nonetheless demonstrates that “theatre artists can stage a performance that goes against the grain of the larger framework of a festival” – or, in our case, of the Expo as a festivalizing mega-event – “producing a tension between the theatre event and the overall structure that has the potential to push festival attendees (both artists and spectators) to reevaluate the festival’s ideological thrust” (6).

To adapt McMahon’s argument, projects such as Toki can “avoid some – if not all – of the pitfalls of a global arts market and create spaces for genuine (and

often contentious) cultural debates" – whose effects reverberate beyond the time-space of the event. This occurs chiefly through interpellation of a specific cultural, linguistic, or geopolitical membership, and commitment to a "low density" format that prizes social interaction over scale, sales, and spectacle (5, 21).²⁷ Moreover, if one agrees with Yung that "real dissemination must start with a critique of the system for disseminating culture" (2013:225), intercultural exchange should then empower artists to reassess "the relationship between their individual self and the establishment" (236) without any pressure to produce artistic merchandise for ideological enlistment or capitalist consumption.

The Toki Theatre is not a product but a practice. Toki does not peddle antiques in the global "'supermarket of culture'" (Wehle 2003:27), which large-scale international festivals often tend to promote. Toki can be said to "recast" (McMahon 2014) the very meaning of intercultural theatre praxis in transnational contexts. Whereas the classic brand of hegemonic interculturalism has been chastised for misappropriating decontextualized fragments of tradition purely in virtue of their ornamental potential, the Toki Theatre deprives tradition precisely of those features that make it marketable and

attractive on the global circuit – the lavish costumes, the elaborate makeup, the exquisite props, the spectacular stunts. Toki substitutes the essentialist ontology of classic interculturalism for the rhizomatic ontology of relations.

The cross-referential horizon of Asia as method assists a critical turn toward an integrative notion of intercultural comparison which is neither limited to the “static” appraisal of similarities and differences (Stanford Friedman 2013:40) between autonomous units (*kunqu and noh, China and Japan, modernity and tradition*), nor simply premised upon contrasts (*kunqu versus noh, China versus Japan, modernity versus tradition*), and juxtapositions (*kunqu alongside noh, China alongside Japan, modernity alongside tradition*). As Toki reveals, intercultural theatre in the inter-Asian mode incubates “the possibility for a progressive politics of comparison” (40), namely, a conception of comparison as dynamic relational dialogism (*kunqu with noh, China with Japan, modernity with tradition*). In so doing, it also challenges established notions of modernity and tradition, not only in that it modernizes tradition through a conversation of modern and traditional genres, but also because it foregrounds tradition as a conduit of modernity, and an archive for

the future.

Under this framework, relation is both an epistemology and a methodology, and so is Asia as method. Asia as method is not tantamount to Asia as center: its aim is not to simply transfer our discursive coordinates onto new normative standards, absolute universalisms, and hegemonic singularities, but to foreground Asia – and (inter-)Asian theatre(s) – as a diffuse multiplicity of synchronous connections and rhizomatic collectivities.

¹ These are, respectively, the official Chinese and English denominations of the Project, as chosen by the organizers. The same applies to all bilingual Chinese-English performance titles provided in the remainder of this essay.

² Chen's notion of Asia, and also mine in this instance, chiefly refers to Northeast Asia. I engage the terms "Asia" and "Asian" critically; namely, with awareness of the debate concerning their contested and shifting connotations, which is, however, beyond the scope of this essay to re-rehearse.

³ For a discussion of "comparison as relation" see Shih (2013).

⁴ For an account of the kun-noh project that engages the notion of minjian see Wang T. (2012). Minjian is also translated as "people-to-people" and, in the context of

mainland China, it is often invoked to denote non-governmental or civil society initiatives that fall beyond the remit of the Party-State.

⁵ Yung has experimented with xiqu formats since the 1990s. In 2002, Zuni formally initiated the “Shiyan chuantong” (Experimenting Traditions) scheme to research and innovate Sinophone operatic genres including kunqu, jingju, *chuanju* (Sichuan Opera), and others.

⁶ A renowned kunqu performer and head of the Jiangsu Theatre since 2004, Ke Jun has collaborated with Yung and Zuni on several productions. At Expo 2010, they presented the long-term collaboration, *Yeben* (Flee By Night, 2004).

⁷ This account is based on a video recording of the performance (mimitammy24 2011). Descriptions and analyses of the Toki 1T2C productions presented below draw on video and photographic documentation, blogs, and reviews, except for the 2015 performances, which I attended in Nanjing on 30 and 31 October.

⁸ For further analysis see Hannerz (1996), and Vertovec (2009). For an insightful discussion of transnationalism in English-language Asian theatre communities in Singapore, the UK, and the US, see Rogers (2014).

⁹ On these topics see also Hubbert (2015), Nordin (2012), and Winter (2015).

¹⁰ Incidentally, the cooperative spirit of kyosei is at the heart of the corporate philosophy of Canon, one of the Japan Pavilion's sponsors.

¹¹ Nanjing, then spelled Nanking, was the capital of the Republic of China in 1927–1937, under Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) regime. The Massacre unfolded over six weeks in December 1937 and January 1938, with an estimated number of victims ranging from 40,000 to over 300,000.

¹² Nanjing is one of China's centers of kunqu production.

¹³ Yung reiterated this point publicly in Japan upon being awarded a Fukuoka Prize in 2014 for his lifelong contributions to cultural exchange.

¹⁴ One of these, the dance drama *Zhuhuan* (Crested Ibises, 2014), was co-sponsored by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party Shanghai Committee, and Shanghai Gewutuan (Shanghai Song and Dance Troupe). The latter's deputy director, Chen Feihua, has stated that the concept was inspired by the Expo 2010 performances at the Japan Pavilion (Shanghai Municipal Government 2015). Notably, *Crested Ibises* was one of five 2014 productions singled out for praise in the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper, *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) (Wang Y. 2015).

¹⁵ Founded in 1977, the Jiangsu Theatre was one of the seven kunqu state troupes established under the new Communist regime after 1949. It was privatized as a limited company in 2005.

¹⁶ This line alludes to the poem "Yufu" (The Fisherman), attributed to Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 BC), and anthologized in the *Chuci* (Songs of the South).

¹⁷ In 2015, Satō presented two 1T2C contributions, both called *Zhan 2015* (Station 2015). Uzawa appeared in the second version alongside kunqu *chou* (clown role) performer Liu Xiaoyun, whereas Noh actor Kitanami Takahiro, also from Tessenkai, and kunqu *dan* (female role) Sun Yijun performed in the first version.

¹⁸ For further analysis and examples of modernization and commercialization of traditional theatres in China and Japan see Li (2012) on jingju, Lei (2011b) on jingju, kunqu, and yueju (Cantonese Opera), and Anno and Halebsky (2014) on noh.

¹⁹ Also translated as “highlights,” the term zhezixi indicates key scenes excerpted from full-length plays that are performed separately as self-standing pieces.

²⁰ I derive the term “pre-expressivity” from Barba and Savarese (2006).

²¹ See Wang (2013) for an example of such critique.

²² One example is *Fuluoyide xunzhao Zhongguo qing yu shi* (Sigmund Freud in Search of Chinese Matter and Mind, 2002), directed by Yung and Zuni co-artistic director Mathias Woo Yan-wai, and starring the Jiangsu Theatre’s renowned female *xiaosheng* (young male role), Shi Xiaomei.

²³ A former member of Shanghai kunqu yuan (Shanghai Kun Opera Theatre), Zhang left in 2009 to establish China’s first privately owned kunqu troupe, the Shanghai Zhang Jun kunqu yishu zhongxin (Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Centre).

²⁴ *The Four Dreams of Linchuan* are *Peony Pavilion*, *Zichai ji* (The Story of the Purple Hairpin, 1587), *Nanke ji* (A Dream under the Southern Bough, 1600), and *Handan ji* (The Handan Dream, 1601).

²⁵ On *Peony Pavilion* and Zuni's previous experiments with Tang's *Four Dreams* see Ferrari (2014a). See Ferrari (2014b) for video excerpts and photographs of the productions.

²⁶ These descriptions recur in the traditional performers' testimonials about the Toki Project and Yung's shiyan xiqu. See, for instance, Zhang Jun's reflections in Wang X. (2015).

²⁷ McMahon derives the notion of "low density" festival from Sauter (2007).

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